

SUPERNATURAL BELIEF IN JAVANESE CULTURE: INEVITABLE AND ERRONEOUS¹

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Abstract: The Javanese people have a healthy belief in ghosts, magic and the supernatural; one which often seems contradictory to the more scientifically-based beliefs held in the western world. These beliefs are born from ignorance and from culture. Ignorance here has a relationship to levels of both literacy and personal intelligence, and if ignorance causes a lack of understanding, lack of understanding is a breeding ground for belief in ghosts. The culture of the Javanese is the other major factor in producing such strong and widely-held beliefs. Traditional and modern popular cultures create a mental pre-conditioning that affects judgement. Similarly, collective belief and especially the use of story give the Javanese an excellent foundation for embracing all things supernatural. Combined with prevalent social conditions, the Javanese are convinced, but wrongly so, of the existence of ghosts and magic.

Key words supernatural, ignorance, culture, science, ghosts

INTRODUCTION

Question almost any Javanese person on their supernatural beliefs and their response will be in the affirmative. According to the natives, this land is riddled with ghosts, spirits and phantoms; not just the land they live on, the skies they live under, where the supposedly real manifestation of the preternatural is unforgiving in it's abundance, but on the television, at the movies, in everyday gossip, in the depths of homes purporting to be the residence of *dukun*, practitioners of witchcraft, healing and exorcism. A belief in ghosts is an unwavering constant on this Indonesian island.

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- 1 This article is based on, and is a development of, a speech entitled *Oriental, Magic and Superstition: The Western point of View*, presented on October 15, 2003, at Vina House, Semarang, under the auspices of The English Circle.
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What is striking, to the *londo* (foreigner), is not that a culture can produce such ideas, for indeed all cultures can point to folktales and legends of the occult, but that here and now in the 21st Century these beliefs are so seriously held. This can be almost cute: hailing from Scotland, I smiled when people often enquired if the depiction in the *Highlander* series of movies³ was a real one, expecting a positive answer. Yet in turn, this strength of belief can be frightening and dangerous: The Jakarta Post, reporting on a double rape, stated that “[the accused] told police that he raped the victims after he received a message while meditating at Ni Mas Gandaria Cemetery”.⁴ Society cries out in condemnation of such vile acts, but surely it is not solely the crime that should be denounced, but also the underlying beliefs.

The supernatural should be considered as “something that cannot be explained by the laws of science”⁵ due to only one pretext: that it does not exist. However, the very framework of Javanese culture appears to sustain such beliefs, and even acts as a foundation from which they can emanate and evolve.

IGNORANCE

‘Supernatural’ is a compound of two constituents, and the dictionary definition of this term is shown above. Consider another perspective: *super*, especially when combined with adjectives (of which ‘natural’ is one), can mean ‘extremely’ or ‘very’; *natural*, among other things, means ‘normal’. So there is the basis of an argument – *supernatural* could, if so chosen, mean ‘extremely normal’, and it is on this persuasion that we should lean.

Events or occurrences deemed as supernatural should not be given a value of abnormality. Rather, they are normal and explicable phenomena, often falsely accredited due to a factor of ignorance. An example should help illuminate this point: the Javanese ghost *tindihan*. This is the preferred name of the spectre present if ever a person wakes up and is unable to move, simultaneously sensing a presence in the room. It is an eerie ordeal.

3 Three movies starring Christopher Lambert based on a feud between immortal characters acted out across a great span of history.

4 Multa Fidrus, “Man held for rape of 2 neighbours”. *The Jakarta Post* 30 September 2003.

5 A. S. Hornby. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, 5th ed. Edited by Jonathan Crowther. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1995.

Scientist Susan Blackmore asserts that this is actually the cause of a neurological trick called *sleep paralysis*:

[Sleep paralysis] is a feature of the mind that prevents sleeping people from moving their limbs as they would if they were acting out their dreams. If the sleep paralysis system malfunctions, people who are partially awake may undergo sleep paralysis. Experiments show that in such cases they typically get a strong impression that 'somebody is there' (cited in Pratchett et al., 2002:327-329).

A 'supernatural event' is thus contradicted and revealed as an event originating from causality. Essentially, science is the search for causality, for explanation, and argues that a high-level intelligence can only be based on a *reliance on science*. So why are the Javanese not championing causality and science in these matters? Cultural constraints and traditions assume a role in this, and shall be further discussed below.

An effect also arises from human ignorance, and the supernatural has long been linked to ignorance. A German scholar, Aby Warburg in 1923 wrote, "what interested me was how [the people] went on practising with undiminished faith magic rituals that we tend to look on with contempt as a sign of complete backwardness" (cited in Parks, 2002:250). Hence, such beliefs are ridiculed; tolerated merely as a quirk in the system rather than an area to be given serious thought.

Human ignorance is not more or less a trait of the Javanese than any other culture you choose to focus on, but is inherent in all cultures. In Java, however, as in South East Asia, there is an apparent and perceived lower level of general knowledge (including scientific knowledge) possessed by the average citizen (Said, 1995). The blame for this should not just be apportioned to the education system, which indeed seems complete enough from elementary to secondary high levels, but instead is more likely to be the consequence of a nation where reading is not given the importance it is in other countries (this lack of interest in books, or lack of access to books, is a common characteristic of the *developing* country) coupled with levels of illiteracy.⁶ This is because, a lack of literacy will lead to a lack of intellectual knowledge, and a lack of interest in reading can have an equally grave effect.

6 Of over 200 million inhabitants, illiteracy levels in Indonesia stood at 23% in 1998 and were in danger of increasing. School enrolment was at an estimated 60%. (cited in Peter Turner. *Java*. 2nd Edition. Hawthorn. Australia: Lonely Planet Publications. 1999)

Indeed, reading should be considered a prerequisite for the acquisition of knowledge. Without written records, knowledge fades at the mercy of Time; without practising reading, such records are inaccessible. Ignorance or a lack of understanding, leads to belief, for it is human nature to search for explanation and reason. Caught in the chains of ignorance we are forced to create our own belief systems. These systems, however, often fall back on magic.

Stewart and Cohen (2003) maintain that there are three types of magic. First is the turning of a verbal instruction (spell) into material action.⁷ Second, something to be wondered at (a card trick, the Aurora Borealis). Third, technical magic: the 'magic' of flicking a switch and suddenly a light comes on. Is magic (and *a priori* ghosts) simply the effect of a lack of understanding? Arthur C. Clarke (1967) famously said, that any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic. This idea features frequently in popular culture where a scenario is created where a protagonist from the past, or a backward community, is brought into a modern, technologically advanced world, as seen in such films as *Kate and Leopold* and *Crocodile Dundee*, or Clive Kingsley's book, *Stig of the Dump*. It is not just technology that confuses us; science too is often considered a world beyond everyday reach - and it is this shortfall in comprehension that can promote supernatural belief.

The brain, to the surprise of many, is extremely fallible and untrustworthy. A quick flip though any introduction to modern philosophy will soon establish how easily the brain is convinced first of one theory and then it's opposite. Even simple optical illusions (the never-ending staircase, parallel lines that appear curved, etc.) show how readily the brain is duped. Our cognitive senses are, more regularly than we care to admit, tricked (a factor seized upon by magicians and salesmen alike). David Copperfield once famously walked 'by magic' through the Great Wall of China. This event was televised around the globe, yet not one person saw it. Yes, the watching audience was indeed vast, but not one of them could claim to have 'seen' the trick as canvas covers were set up along both sides of the wall where the illusion was performed. While one student of mine remarked that this addition made it all the more impressive, in actuality this device was to keep us

7 Even this phenomenon can now have a technological element to it: some modern homes now have mod cons such as lights and TV that are voice-operated.

ignorant. Science feeds on evidence, and Copperfield immediately had us (and our senses) at a disadvantage by closing off at least the visual avenue to proof.

If ghosts are to be believed, where is the proof? Our whole world and existence is founded on evidence and proofs, yet people willingly waive this sensibility when confronted by ghosts. The question must be begged, *where is the proof?* Where is that final and indisputable documentation that demands the records be rewritten, that history alters its course? Photographic evidence of UFOs, the Loch Ness Monster, Bigfoot, ghosts, is always blurred, grainy, and more importantly, suspect. Java, too, is filled with tales and lore that, while colourful and seemingly alive, are insubstantial in their evidence or their ability to verify themselves; could this insubstantiality be not just the 'old age' of the stories, proof subtly lost in history, but perhaps also is reflected in the collective knowledge of the storyteller? Not only do the stories lack any concrete source to which we can turn, but the narrators themselves are unquestioningly entranced, yielding to the power of the story without feeling any need to support the claims they keep alive.

CULTURE

Customs, traditions, the ways of life of a society – is culture, this all-encompassing entity, plays a significant role in the exaltation of the ghost in Javanese culture. Culture is a multi-faceted, multi-levelled organism, thus it's influence on the belief systems held in Java are also viewed as having many varied sources.

In early October 2003, a television programme, *Dunia Lain*⁸ (The Other World), ran an episode filmed in Lawang Sewu (1,000 Doors), Semarang. Formerly Dutch offices, headquarters of the Japanese forces, and TNI⁹ offices, this now derelict building retains an impressive beauty. But it is also enveloped in a sense of foreboding, for it is locally notorious as a favoured hangout of the supernatural community, a *hotel hantu* (hotel of ghosts). This particular episode featured a local, Wahyu, invited to stay in the building, where he duly heard strange noises, the sound of chains being dragged, and saw an apparition. It is the second of these occurrences that catches the attention. Phantoms in chains, spirits physically (for want of a

8. Produced by PT. Televisi Transformasi Indonesia

9. Tentara Nasional Indonesia (Indonesian National Armed Forces)

better word!) trapped in purgatory, awaiting release or judgment – such a well-worn stereotype forces the question on *Dunia Lain*, was this occurrence a mere coincidence, or was it in fact predestined?

Why do ghosts regularly carry chains? They certainly didn't bring them along before they died. Nor is it possible to imagine that immediately on crossing the threshold to death, we (whatever constitutes 'we' at that stage) find ourselves in Charlie's Cheap Chains store, discounts for the newly deceased, guaranteed rust-free for eight reincarnations or your money back. On the contrary, this idea of chains is a 'picture' created mentally, society's way of visualising it's interpretation that ghosts are souls trapped between this world and the next. Chains become a useful metaphor, successfully creating an image that gives us meaning in accordance with the accepted belief (that of ghosts being 'trapped entities'). And this metaphor has stuck, so much so that it now enters what Stewart and Cohen (2003) call our "mental pre-conditioning".

Mental pre-conditioning is the sister of stereotype, being the way our minds assume things or expect things to be a certain way in any given circumstance. Mental pre-conditioning is the reason behind many of society's widely-held beliefs: the idea that women belong in the kitchen, the idea that life should follow the cycle of going to school - finding a job - marrying - raising a family - retiring, and an unending list of other ideas. Anything perceived as going against these so-called norms is viewed as an aberration and often is devalued or derided as abnormal, unacceptable or undesirable. Mental pre-conditioning is immensely powerful - we subjectively judge people by their unkempt appearance, their tailor-made imported suit, the car they drive, the newspaper they read. In fact, living in *societies*, built on values that are considered as norms, it is forgivable to reach the impression that judgments are formed not by each of us as individual components of a unit, but are forged together, as a whole. Children are raised and taught to differentiate between what we show them to be right and wrong, to know what things are sad, what things happy, what things disgusting. Mental pre-conditioning often, or perhaps usually, is stronger than our need for proof. Why do we automatically dress smartly for an interview when employers are not allowed to discriminate according to appearance? Because it is precisely this grooming of ourselves that society considers the norm for this situation, and so each individual considers it the norm, too. We fall in line, as we are all part of the society.

The ghost carrying chains is just another mental pre-condition, reinforced by folklore, movies and novels. It's an expectation, a presumption, and so, like placebo in medical tests, it works, it occurs, and the chains are heard. Our stereotypes (and so too ourselves with them, for what is 'self' if not a communion of all our thoughts and feelings) are justified. The brain manipulates stereotype and pre-conditioning to legitimize many of its thoughts, decisions and actions; if no condition that is expected arises, it is possible for the brain to compensate, to convince us that our expectations are indeed fulfilled (in a similar way to when, upon seeing the letters 'ubmarine', our brain reports the word 'submarine' rather than registering the unrecognised or unexpected 'ubmarine').

Other such stereotypes can be found in our haunted imaginations. One, applicable to Lawang Sewu and a host of other cases, is that of the large, empty building. It is not coincidence that climactic conclusions to thrillers are often set in empty warehouses (*Terminator*, *The One*), vacant churches (*The Crow*), sewers (Stephen King's *It*), lonely forests (*The Blair Witch Project*), and that haunted houses are more often than not unoccupied (or even huge hotels in the case of Kubrick's *The Shining*). Is it that ghosts have some shared phobia of crowded spaces? No, this is just another form of mental pre-conditioning. Hotels should be teeming with life - the constant to and fro of guests and staff, the clatter of the restaurant, the hum of elevators, the ringing of telephones; universities alive with the chatter of students, the voices of teachers, footsteps; the warehouse humming with machinery and workers. Such conditions the brain expects, but if placed in familiar surroundings with a new atmosphere that is completely out of sync, the brain struggles to come to terms with it. We feel uncomfortable, unable to settle on this contradictory image (a school at midnight, an empty cathedral on a Tuesday), and so we feel jumpy and nervous. The brain, already adapt at playing with us, to working overtime. We glance over our shoulders when walking alone on darkened streets, relieved yet somehow surprised that nobody (or no thing) is following behind; we see shadows and solidify them in our minds as images of monsters or half-hidden attackers. Imagination and the subconscious are powerful objects, sparked into life when confronted by natural phobias - fear of being alone, fear of the dark, fear of being lost. Under the control of imagination and deeply-hidden feelings, who is to recognize what is real and what is figment? Are the hallucinations of the drug-user, or the sleep-deprived man, real? Yet they are there. We are helpless

before our imaginations.

The Javanese are protected, much more so than in the West, from subjection to these types of situation. Almost no house, with all occupants asleep, will extinguish all the lights. Lights shine from porches, from roofs; lights from main rooms in the house are left reassuringly on until morning, keeping us from waking to darkness, and it is this overexposure to light that condemns the Javanese. There is no opportunity to become accustomed to the dark, to the tricks of light and shadow that it employs, and so when suddenly exposed to such a situation the mind has no experience to support it and help prevent it from falling into the clutches of the imagination. Lighting has an element of security and no doubt is very useful in deterring bandits, thieves and other unwanted, yet this very natural fear, having been defended against and allayed over time, requires a new focus. The security is successful, to the extent that it loses its original definition. Actions need to be justified once more, and it is the supernatural that is available to fill the gap, to provide an answer to the necessity to justify.

In a similar fashion, the Javanese are underexposed to solitude. 'Single occupancy' is not a well-worn term in Java. Large families are not uncommon, extended family too may still dwell in a single household, mature 'children' usually leave home to marry rather than this being preceded by a period of living alone. Even those forced from the family home to study or work will invariably end up, if not living with more distant family members, in a boarding house, where despite sleeping alone they are still very much a part of a communal habitat, with other tenants separated from them only by walls. Unsurprisingly then, many Javanese spend their entire lives having never slept alone in a house, having never lived alone. The social demands of city-life call for employment around the clock, 24-hour street stalls, roads that are quiet yet somehow never quite deserted. Village life calls for early rising before even the sun has risen. Ramadan, a month of daylight fasting observed by Muslims¹⁰, is the antecedent of non-stop activity throughout the night. Java could be mistaken for New York in Sinatra's song, "a city that never sleeps"¹¹. As with the underexposure to darkness, this abundance of social contact allows the Javanese little preparation for when such situations

10 Muslims account for approximately 90% of the Indonesian population.

11 Frank Sinatra. "New York, New York". *New York, New York*. audio LP. Goldrush. 1977.

arise - the strangeness, the abnormality, is greatly enhanced, ergo the nervousness, the jumpiness, the inability to cope; left exposed to attacks from the imagination, the brain easily succumbs to strange thoughts.

Mental pre-conditioning is a by-product, or perhaps a partner, of another cultural institution, that of collective belief. Collective belief teaches people, continually from birth right through until death, how to fit in with society or a culture. Collective beliefs can and do vary between tribe, gender, age, socio-economic class, etc. One difference between Javanese and Western European values is that the West, allows, while perhaps not going as far as advocating, pre-marital sexual relationships. In Java, such acts are forbidden. Children are brought up in these contrasting cultures in ways that reflect these collective beliefs - the Javanese focus on prevention and abhorrence, the West more focused on awareness and contraception.

Peer pressure is also a form of collective belief – films are watched and books read because others have recommended them; we start smoking, we sport the latest fashion, we concur, agree, unite - because it's what our peers do, it's what everybody does, furthermore, it's deemed as *being right*. People don't like to not fit in, they don't enjoy not feeling 'normal', to the extent that they believe the collective, they follow the majority¹². Who cares if McDonalds' burgers are more expensive than the local café, if Nike trainers are \$150 more expensive than the supermarket brand - they're simply believed to be better, and people trust this because everybody tells them so.

Collective belief has a strong foundation in childhood, gripping its audience from a young age, often through the application of a story. Children are told stories, and through these stories learn what it is to be a member of a culture, tribe or society.

Why are we so wedded to stories? Our minds are limited to grasp the universe for what it is. Instead, we operate with simplified representations of limited parts of the universe. We find simple models that correspond closely to reality extremely attractive (Pratchett and Cohen, 2003:326).

12 Even minority groups form a kind of 'majority': they are still considered as a group, where the group is governed by certain ideals, characteristics, etc. It is very difficult to maintain an individualism in the modern world, where almost any belief will adhere to one faction or another, however minor that faction happens to be.

So the *Three Little Pigs* teach children that man can learn from his mistakes. *Winnie the Pooh* gobbles up all the honey and then gets stuck in a rabbit-hole, moralizing that greed can have negative consequences. The biblical David and Goliath show that possession of physical attributes does not mean that chances of success are necessarily greater. And so on, *ad infinitum*. Indeed, "an adult has to be able to tell stories to the next generation of children, or the culture does not propagate" (Pratchett and Cohen, 2003:327). It is also true to say that, "Our minds make stories, and stories make our minds." (Ibid, 2003:327). Ghost stories originated in this way. Children are told to be good children, or else the bogeyman (or any other local variation on this theme) will get them. People are told not to cross the moors alone at night - a sensible enough warning - and this simple advice is strengthened by the addition of a werewolf, headless horseman (similar to the Javanese *jaran penoleh*, horse with turned head), *babi ngepet* (pig), or *ula ngrip*i (moving snake). Ghost stories were warnings - of dark places, of lonely places, of nightfall - not warning of the supernatural, but using the supernatural as an extra deterrent in warning of the very real dangers of robbery, attack and rape.

The anthropologist, Sir Alfred Radcliffe-Brown (cited in Parks, 2002:251).described that "more important than the efficacy of magic was it's social function, which was to underline the importance to the group of the desired or protected event." How more intensely people listen, how more completely they adhere to the warnings when ghosts are added to the equation. Faced with criminals or evil men, people can imagine defending themselves - fighting them off, hiding from attack, outrunning them to escape - but from ghosts and the supernatural there is no protection, no escape, and the warnings are given extra heed.

Man loves stories, and they spread between people as "memes" (Dawkins, 1990). As genes are passed on from one generation to the next, so memes are passed from one human mind to another. A meme is an idea that the human brain finds appealing enough to want to pass it on to someone else. The song *Happy Birthday*, for instance, is a simple meme. Ideologies (e.g. Communism) and religions¹³ are examples of complex systems of

13 Java also has a long-standing tradition of mysticism, influenced by both Hindu-Buddhist and Islamic mysticism. *Agama Jawa* (Javanese religion) encompasses spirits, deities and magic.

memes. In Java, many *memes* are linked to the supernatural: in rituals performed after death, in *dayang* (village guardians), *inggang ngemon* (guardians spirits that protect an individual), in the siren-like *kuntilanak*.

Stories are memes. Stories, however, are often more powerful than the truth. Think of rumour and gossip - stories unsubstantiated by truth, yet man's love of the story drags people into them; they listen, they contemplate, they comment, they spread it to others. Indeed, rumour can be very destructive, and even if false or unproven can lead to reputations being irreversibly tarnished, to the loss of jobs or status, to any number of undesirable outcomes. Story is winning in the battle against truth. And so, wielding an arsenal of story, ghosts leap into existence.

Children's stories have a heavy base in magic, the occult and the supernatural: *Sleeping Beauty*, *Snow White*, *Arabian Nights*, etc., and in Java, the mystical elements portrayed in *wayang*.¹⁴ This influence is rife. These stories that human life is structured upon are founded in the supernatural; just consider for a moment the meaning of the term 'fairy tale'. Ghost stories are fascinating and exciting and people cling to them and popularize them, and so the meme spreads, carrying with it belief.

CONCLUSION

Supernatural belief is a part of Javanese culture and has many pillars offering its support. Ignorance, phobia, the close proximity of society, mental misrepresentation, collective belief and stories all are causes of the Javanese belief in the supernatural. Commonsense often seems waylaid. Take *feng shui*, a Chinese originated tradition attributing positive and negative energies to the position of furnishings in a home. It advocates that a bed should not immediately face the door or the occupant's personal energy can freely flow from the room. But is this merely commonsense, such an ideal preventing direct exposure to possible draughts and therefore decreasing the chances of catching a cold or flu?

Man is frightened of the unknown, of things they don't understand.¹⁵ 'Oh my, you live in Indonesia?', a friend could express in shock, imagining horrors unspoken, entrenched in his mind. This is no doubt a result of collective belief. So in the search for understanding, man creates explanations: 'There

14 Shadow-puppet theatre, often based on the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*.

15 Often cited as a reason behind the rise of racism, homophobia, xenophobia, etc.

was no UFO, you were just drunk', 'It's just your imagination playing tricks on you', 'We must have incurred the wrath of the thunder god'. As our ancestors found ways of explaining thunderstorms, earthquakes and other natural phenomena, in so doing shifting them from mystery to understanding, so they were less fearful - it was not the thunder they need fear, but the gods that must be appeased. And so, too today, man is constantly seeking explanation - if one is not forthcoming then man is perfectly capable (or perfectly imaginative) to form his own theories, his own truths, yet regularly these fail to account for our ignorance or our ability to misinterpret our senses. Knowledge can arrest many myths. The strange noises heard in buildings at night are likely the cause of simple physics. In the heat of the day, materials such as wood, stone and metal expand. Contracting again in the coolness of night, energy loss is often in the form of sound.

Ignorance is strongly linked to a lack of education (schooled or self), itself a forerunner for lack of scientific knowledge. Where scientific fact is absent, the gaps in understanding still require filling, and in Java these holes are plugged by the supernatural. Could religion also have some bearing on this matter? Science and religion often find themselves at opposite poles of a discussion. The Javanese are very strong in their religious beliefs.¹⁶ It is inordinately difficult to locate a professed atheist here. Surely it is no coincidence that in Java, where God, angels and demons walk the earth, it is no great leap but a mere sidestep to the belief in ghosts. Surely it is no coincidence that in the western world, where a majority profess atheism or agnosticism, where science is proclaimed as the Almighty, belief in the supernatural reaches significantly lower proportions.

Culture is everything to each individual and to each society. Each culture surreptitiously contains its own 'Make-a-Human' kit. Perhaps the purpose of any culture "is to foster collective self-deceit, to provide an enchantment within which we can live out our thrills and fears. Modern man has to make a big effort to deceive himself consciously, he has to decide to be in error, he has to go in search of illusion." (Parks, 2002:138)

In the words of the French poet, Mallarme, man is "throwing itself madly into the Dream that it knows it is not, and proclaiming, before the Nothingness that is the truth, those glorious falsehoods!" (cited in Parks, 2002:141-142).

16 The state recognises no less than five official religions: Islam. Christianity. Catholicism. Buddhism and Hindi.

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